

Reflections on Art and Sustainability

by Victor Margolin

The term "sustainability" has taken on varied meanings in the twenty-five years since it first came into use. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development, headed by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, defined it as follows:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs,' in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.¹

This definition appeared in the Commission's report *Our Common Future*, which was published fifteen years after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm—the first in a series of international meetings on environmental concerns; fifteen years after the Club of Rome's seminal study *The Limits to Growth*; five years before the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which resulted in the document *Agenda 21: The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*; and fifteen years before the last of the global United Nations environmental gatherings, Earth Summit 2002, which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Because sustainability initially arose within the framework of international politics, it is a more pragmatic approach to overcoming social injustice and environmental ills than the idealistic ecological theories that include deep ecology, which stems from the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess; spiritual ecology, which puts a particular emphasis on the capacity to experience oneness with the planet; James Lovelock's Gaia movement; and social ecology, which emphasizes social organization and collaboration with nature.²

My own definition of sustainability follows in principle the statement in *Our Common Future* that "the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature."³ However, I choose to put the Brundtland Commission's connection between the social and the environmental into a sharper political focus by substituting the term "social justice" for "harmony among human beings" and "environmental justice" for harmony "between humanity and nature." Sustainability and the methods of achieving it are inherently political and, thus, contestable. Therefore, its definition should emphasize the need for struggle to achieve sustainable goals.

The culture deficit

In the various meetings and declarations on sustainability mentioned above, discussions of culture were nonexistent. The closest the United Nations came to the subject was the 1995 report *Our Creative Diversity*, which sums up the deliberations of UNESCO's World Commission on Culture and Development. The commission took up problems of culture within the broad context of economic and social development and consequently had little to say about specific cultural activities such as literature, music, or art.⁴

I was heartened to find the cultural question addressed in a recent essay by Hildegard Kurt, "Aesthetics of Sustainability," which appeared in a volume initiated by the German artist Herman Prigann.⁵ Kurt argues that questions about the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of sustainability have lagged behind the debates on the topic that originated in the natural and social sciences during the mid 1980s. Though she does not refer directly to themes of human injustice such as torture, disease, and poverty with which artists have long been engaged, she does criticize the art world's limited view of sustainability: "In the art world," she writes, "lively dialogue is often hindered by the error of seeing sustainability only as an 'environmental subject' and not as a genuinely cultural challenge."⁶

Kurt also highlights the lack of cultural considerations in the sustainability discourse. "Anyone trying to find out why sustainability is not attractive as the task of the century," she writes, "will come across the 'culture deficit' inherent in the conception of the model. In fact you will largely look in vain for artists as protagonists of sustainable future development in the *Rio Declaration* and *Agenda 21*. And culture as an element in society, going beyond the arts and humanist education to include symbolic and aesthetic creative practice by individuals and societies, is scarcely mentioned either."⁷ Given that discussions of culture, and especially art, are missing from the ecology and sustainability discourses of large international organizations and populist ecological movements alike, how does one begin to think about art's relation to sustainability such that a new understanding of artistic practice might result?

Sustainable art and its precedents

Before continuing to speculate on this topic, I would like to briefly review some of the art movements and projects that one might consider as sustainable art or precedents for it. The projects fall into several categories: art that engages with the land or landscape; art that incorporates sustainable practices such as recycling; and art that responds to social issues through the production of objects or discourse. Within the first category, artists have engaged with the land in different ways, not all of which can be seen as environmentally sustainable. Various terms such as "environmental art," "earth art," "land art," and "eco-art," have characterized these interventions. Walter De

Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969), Dennis Oppenheim's *Time Pocket* (1968), and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) [FIGURE 1] represent artists' intentions to alter the landscape, either by making cuts, gashes, or holes in its surface, forming new shapes from large masses of earth, stone, or other materials, or, as with De Maria's *Lightning Field*, filling a large field with metal rods lined up in symmetrical rows.

Other artists produce sculpted or constructed forms that they place in



FIG. 1

Robert Smithson
Spiral Jetty, April 1970
Great Salt Lake, Utah

Black rock, salt crystals, earth, and red water (algae)
3 x 15 x 1500 feet

Art © Estate of Robert Smithson / licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

the landscape to enter a dialogue with it. These include Mary Miss's *Sunken Pool* (1974) and Alice Aycock's *Circular Building with Narrow Ledge for Walking* (1976), the latter a structure that invites participation from the public. A third group of artists work with processes found in nature. Their projects are exemplified by Hans Haacke's *Ten Turtles Set Free* (1970) and Newton Harrison's *Slow Growth and Death of a Lily Cell* (1968). Related projects include Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1965–1978–ongoing) and Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* (1982–87) [FIGURE 3].⁸ Sonfist obtained the use of a land parcel on LaGuardia Place in New York City, where he planted trees and shrubbery that would have grown in the precolonial forests of the area, while Beuys's project, which he initiated in 1982 for documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany, involved reforesting the city of Kassel. One of the largest environmental art works ever executed, it was finally completed in 1987 after he died.

In recent years, art in the landscape has taken on a different meaning when it has been used to reclaim sites that were previously abandoned or even subject to some destructive force. To create *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), Agnes Denes planted and harvested two acres of wheat on the Battery Park landfill close to Manhattan. As a discursive act, the project demonstrated how a piece of wasteland could be brought back to life, although it ended without transforming the landfill permanently. In Germany, Herman Prigann, who created the *Terra Nova project* (1996–2000) to reclaim damaged or destroyed landscapes, turned Rheinelbe, a former coal mine area near Gelsenkirchen that had become a garbage dump, into an archeological field replete with traces of former buildings, stone sculptures, and a major landmark called the Skystair.

Recycling is another activity that contributes to a sustainable environment. Since the 1920s, making art out of previously used materials has been one of the significant strands of modernism, although until recent years it has not been framed by a discourse of ecology or sustainability. While Kurt Schwitters made hundreds of collages from the printed flotsam and jetsam of Weimar Germany, critics have never considered him to be an ecological artist. The same is true for John Chamberlain, who reclaimed cast-off auto bodies, which he crushed and shaped into large metal sculptures. On the vernacular side, the “muffler men” made by folk artists in the American Southwest or the toy cars, trucks, and motorcycles created by street artists in Tanzania and other African countries are also examples of industrial waste that is turned to productive use.⁹ Mierle Ukeles, who has served for almost thirty years as

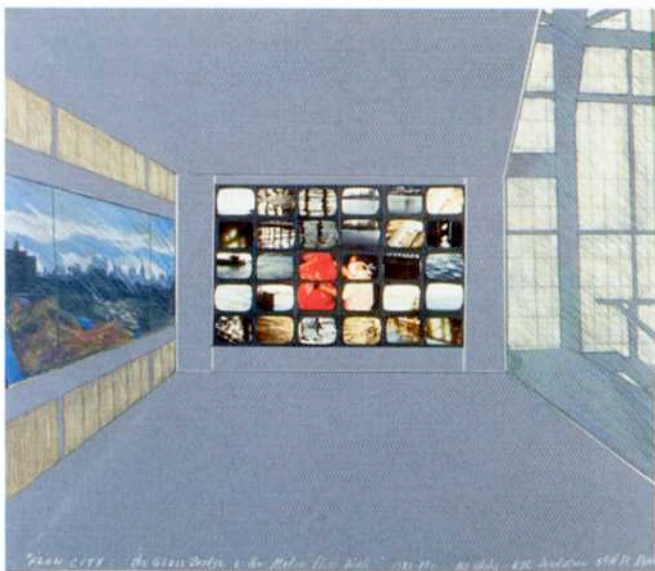


FIG. 2

Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Media Flow City from *Flow City*, 1983–present
 Design for public art/video environment
 at 59th St. Marine Transfer Station,
 New York City Department of Sanitation

artist-in-residence at the New York Sanitation Department, dealt with the problem of waste a different way. In her project *Flow City* (1983–present) [FIGURE 2], she transformed a garbage-recycling unit of the Sanitation Department into a site where the public could observe how garbage is disposed of in actuality and on a video screen. As part of the project, she created a walkway, bridge, and viewing wall that were made of recycled materials.

Art that responds to social injustice is perhaps the largest category that might belong to a culture of sustainability, although it is scarcely visible as such since many artists make art based on social concerns without relating their work to sustainability issues. Within this category, for example, would be Joseph Beuys's well-documented and numerous political actions that include the information office he set up as part of his Organization for Direct Democracy (1971), his founding of the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in Düsseldorf with the writer Heinrich Böll (1974), and his involvement in the genesis of the German Green Party (1979).

Art and sustainability

Three issues are central to the discussion of art and sustainability. The first regards form. If there is an "aesthetics of sustainability" (Kurt's term), then it should be based on something that art provides as a basis for aesthetic judgment. This need not be a physical object, or even an immaterial project. It might be a gesture or even a mental action. What forms, then, does art take in a culture of sustainability? Are they vastly different from the forms of art in mainstream visual culture, or are they sufficiently analogous to be easily understood in a new context?

Kurt's view of art in a modernist context leads her to characterize it as "a form of knowledge." This definition enables art to bring "aesthetic competence into the cognitive process—which makes it different from science and at the same time its equal."⁶⁰ Its not clear what antecedents in modernism's past Kurt is referring to when she characterizes art as knowledge, but one might imagine conceptual art, the Situationists, and some Fluxus activities as examples. Kurt believes that characterizing art as a form of knowledge can empower it discursively.

Once art is recognized as a cognitive medium, integrating aesthetic creative knowledge into the sustainability discourse would have a retrospective effect on that discourse, would change it. Art as a mode means that sustainability is seen, felt, thought, and conceived differently—and communicated differently.⁶¹ Though Kurt's emphasis on art as a bearer of cognition brings it into relation with a discourse on sustainability, it does not clarify sufficiently what the boundaries of this discourse are, nor does it explain the contribution that art might make to it.

Adopting the broad definition of form that Kurt and others have provided leads to a second issue: art's relation to other practices that are concerned with sustainability. After recognizing art as a cognitive medium, how do we then distinguish its particular characteristics from those of architecture, landscape design, graphic design, community action, and additional activities that engage with problems of sustainability, especially when the projects appear to be similar?

A third issue is related to the second. How do we think about art that moves from discourse to action, art whose intent is to produce a useful result? And what about artists who generate ideas and plans rather than objects or actions? Are they planners

or artists, and by what criteria do we evaluate their work? In the never-ending debates on the difference between art and design, the distinction usually comes down to the primacy of discourse in artistic practice and the fact that artists need not be accountable, as designers are, to produce something useful. But when artists want to achieve social results without identifying themselves as designers, how should the critical community respond, and why is the artists' work given special status in a museum or gallery if its aims are predominantly practical?

Problems of interpretation

The widening of artistic possibilities in the last century has had positive results for the future of art and particularly for an art that engages with issues of sustainability. Besides the production of objects, two new elements have been added to artistic practice: participation and action. But these new possibilities have also created problems of interpretation that must be addressed before we can discuss further art's contribution to a sustainable culture.

Earth artists and environmental artists created projects that drew the spectator in as a participant. The experience of environmental art was immediate and more visceral than viewing a picture on a gallery wall. Environmental art expanded the sites of artistic display beyond the gallery or museum, and even the urban spaces of public sculpture. In Beuys's *7000 Oaks*, for instance, people were also invited to participate in planting the trees, not only to walk among them.

Beuys's project, like a number of others, spills over into the realm of action and raises questions about how to determine its aesthetic value. Reforesting Kassel was an ecological gesture to redress the balance of nature in the urban landscape. Though initiated by an artist, it transcended art discourse and became social action. So did a series of similar projects by artists in the United States and Europe. Consider Harriet Feigenbaum's land reclamation work, *Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan for Red Ash and Coal Silt Area—Willow Rings* (1985). On a site damaged by strip mining, the artist planted two concentric circles of willow trees around a pond that was formed from coal-dust run-off. The site became a public park that also preserved the memory of the land's prior use. Similarly, Bonnie Sherk founded The Farm in 1974, bringing together an interdisciplinary team to create a sustainable ecosystem and educational park on a piece of unused land near a



FIG. 3

Joseph Beuys plants the first tree for the *7000 Oaks* project at documenta 7, 1982, Kassel, Germany

San Francisco highway interchange. Finally, Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1990–93) at Pig's Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota, became a biological experiment in which the artist explored the use of plants to remediate the soil in a landfill that had been contaminated by heavy metals.¹²

Formal qualities are easy to identify in the projects by Beuys, Sherk, or Feigenbaum, where we are looking at configurations of materials, whether artificial or natural, in patterns. But what about Chin's research on plants to remediate contaminated soil? Where is the aesthetic dimension? In the ethic of Chin's intention? In the ingenuity of his concept? In the physical arrangement of the plants? The challenge here is difficult, as it is in other eco-art projects. Critics generally evade the interpretive problem by considering such projects within existing categories such as environmental art or land art and then loading a set of prior aesthetic conventions onto them.

And what is the ecological aesthetic of Beuys's Social Sculpture? It has been described as a shift from museological concerns about the context of art to anthropological ones. "Creativity, to him, was a science of freedom. All human knowledge comes from art; the concept of science has evolved from creativity. And so it is that the artist alone is responsible for historical awareness; what counts is to experience the creative factor in history. History must consequently be seen sculpturally. History is sculpture."¹³ The concept has even been institutionalized in the Social Sculpture Research Unit, directed by artist Shelley Sacks at Oxford Brookes University in England. Sacks, who worked with Beuys, describes the projects initiated there as "instruments that involve 'trans-actions' between people, issues and places. They are arenas for negotiation, creating shared currency and new forms of dialogue."¹⁴ What, then, is the basis for an aesthetic judgment? Is there a form to the organization of the workshops that invites aesthetic consideration? The central focus of the projects appears to be the creation of an experience for the participants. While Sacks does not present the projects as artworks, they derive from Beuys's intention to collapse the proverbial boundaries between art and life.

Critics have worked hard to fit Beuys's projects and others like Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* or Newton and Helen Harrison's *Portable Farm: The Flat Pastures* (1971–72) into an art discourse when, in fact, the projects sometimes have more to do with other practices such as landscape architecture, design, or even biology. Part of the problem is that many artists want to participate in social processes or make statements about social situations in ways that transcend the conventional forms of representation that museums and galleries were originally created to house. Even as their projects avoid the commodity forms on which the art market depends, they are sometimes led to produce documentation that nevertheless conforms to the conventions of museum and gallery display as well as to the commodity demands of the art market.

Problems of identity

Once artists enter the realm of action, it is difficult to characterize their projects differently from those of other actors such as landscape designers or even architects. In a recent exhibition, *Groundswell*, at the Museum of Modern Art, a group of exemplary landscape designs were presented. What differentiates them from the previously described environmental projects is that they dealt primarily with postindustrial urban landscapes.¹⁵ The museum's architecture and design department organized the

exhibition, thus preserving the conventional distinction between the practical and the discursive arts. What MoMA's departmental division fails to acknowledge, however, is that the discursive has spilled over into the practical and the practical has become more discursive. The landscape projects have as much to do with art discourse as artists' action projects do with design. The prevailing division between art and design practice is one of the biggest obstacles to holistically envisioning a new sustainable culture and remains a challenge not only for museums, but also for artists and practitioners.

Let us return for a moment to Hildegard Kurt's intention to discover an "aesthetics of sustainability" and her claim that in order for art to function as a cognitive medium, it must be "seen, felt, thought and conceived differently." Although we recognize that culture consists of multiple discursive modes that complement each other's ability to describe, explain, or even represent experience, defining the boundaries of those modes has become increasingly difficult. By separating art too rigidly from complementary practices that engage the same issues and situations, one runs the risk of maintaining a misleading cultural hierarchy in which art projects are understood to carry a heavier discursive load than more pragmatic designs. Thinking this way, however, often minimizes the discursive power in a practical design project.

Artists who call attention to social or environmental problems sometimes garner more notice and public interest than the people who are engaged directly with such problems. For a recent exhibition of his work at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, artist Dan Peterman was invited to build three shed structures—a bicycle repair shop, a marketplace/classroom kiosk, and a garden shed—using standard waste containers. Two were relocated to a local park during the exhibition and adapted for a variety of cultural uses. However, the kiosks received more public attention and occupied more discursive space as art than as design. Had such kiosks been placed in the park directly, they might have merited a mention in the newspaper but not gained the cultural capital they accrued as works of art. By presenting his kiosks in an art exhibition, Peterman performed a service in that he called the need for such structures to public attention, and one could well argue that he used the cultural capital of art's discursive power to call attention to a social need.

Nonetheless, the hierarchy between art, architecture, design, and planning remains a paradox within the culture of sustainability, where the principal criterion of value is to bring into being sustainable projects and environments. The social space for the demonstration of such projects is still coded unsustainably according to discursive hierarchies that privilege some practices over others. This would be less of a problem if the formal manifestations of each practice were sufficiently distinct, but as these formal distinctions break down, we need to open up the discourse about projects to create greater continuity between them.

What gets lost when a cultural hierarchy of practices prevails is the wider knowledge of projects that do not fit easily into an art-world or museum framework. I think here of the many productive ideas that resulted from research at Nancy Jack Todd's and John Todd's New Alchemy Institute, particularly their "living machines" that have been successfully used for water treatment and other purposes but also their ecological designs for urban spaces—hydroponic factories, back lot bioshelters, and bus stop aquaculture designs.¹⁶ These are equivalent to work that some artists have carried out, but they have not been linked to related projects in the art world.

A strategy for a sustainable future

Beuys was instrumental in creating the current difficulties that surround the problem of "ecological aesthetics." He was strategically brilliant in trading on his recognition as a gallery artist to gain attention for his action projects such as *7000 Oaks* and the polemics of his lecture tours. Ultimately all these activities have been drawn into an art discourse, but they don't fit comfortably. To deal with new forms of human expression and action, critics and curators are continually trying to stuff them into institutional boxes where they don't fit. Old categories need to collapse before we can begin to create a different dialogue on aesthetics in a sustainable culture.

We will need a new aesthetic to embrace the three categories of object, participation, and action without privileging the conventional formal characteristics of objects. In this aesthetic, the distinctions between art, design, and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use. Hildegard Kurt was correct when she criticized the art world for viewing sustainability in terms of environmental subjects instead of as a larger cultural challenge. The culture that Kurt identified within the wider sustainability discourse remains an issue and needs to be overcome. This will lead to new forms of solidarity within the culture of sustainability.

Imagination is an artist's greatest asset. It can produce bold visions of what a sustainable future might be like. People can be moved and aroused by powerful environments, innovative designs, and practical demonstrations of active engagement. With open minds and a willingness to collaborate, those who seek a place in the culture of sustainability must move forward. The problem of "ecological aesthetics" will solve itself.